

TAKING HIGH-TECH TO THE Next Level

The latest must-have gear for the home that has it all.

BY JOHN MUGFORD

These days it's a no-brainer: If you're building a home priced at \$1 million or more, you want your domain to be, well, full of brains. You want the latest technology to be available everywhere: while relaxing in the hot tub, cooking dinner, watching a movie, sitting by the pool, even getting out of bed in the morning. When you're away from home, you want to be able to interact with your home's lighting, security, heating, and air conditioning systems via your cell phone, your computer, your PDA.

But exactly what products and technologies are the must-haves for the home that already has it all? That's what we asked several home-builders, appliance retailers, and home-integration and home-theater specialists. Here's what they had to say.

TOTAL HOME INTEGRATION

Home integration systems take charge of all of your home's systems, from security to audio/video to heating/cooling to lighting, and allow you access via keypads stationed around the home and also from remote locations.

With one of these systems, "A person can wake up in the morning and press the 'good morning' button and have a whole series of things take place," explains Jeremy Wolfson of Connect Home Theater and Automation in Minnetonka. "[The system] can open the blinds in certain rooms of the house, turn on a series of lights leading the way to the kitchen, warm up the floor in the bathroom, turn on a TV or sound system, and start the coffee. It can be custom designed to any homeowner's wants or needs."

When you leave the house, all you have to do is hit the "away" button on the keypad and know that the garage door will be closed, activating a security system of surveillance cameras and motion sensors, as well as adjusting the heat, closing window blinds, turning off any lights or electrical appliances that were left on, and otherwise executing any number of commands that have been programmed into the system.

For top-of-the-line home integration, Wolfson suggests HAI and its OmniPro series, as well as systems from Crestron Electronics. A leading name in total home lighting control systems is Lutron. "You can



Top tech trends include home theater speakers such as the Sonance Ellipse that can be aimed directly at the viewer.



RTI's T2+ remote control with user-friendly touch-screen LCD.

HOME THEATERS AND MEDIA ROOMS

The high-tech heart of most million-dollar homes is the home theater (or its multiuse cousin, the media room), the hub for viewing movies, sporting events, or playing video games. The often-overlooked key to any good home theater or media room, says Baker, is an easy-to-use remote control. One of the best is the RTI T2+ that combines the typical buttons of a remote with a customizable touch-screen LCD that's easy to navigate.

"The mistake people can sometimes make," Baker says, "is putting in a home theater with a high-end plasma, or projection sets, displays that can cost \$10,000 and more, and not factoring in a good remote. At \$600, a good remote that controls everything from the TV to the local channels to high-definition channels to the stereo and satellite radio is a bargain."

For large-screen rear-projection televisions, Baker recommends sets from LG and Mitsubishi. Both rear-projection and front-projection televisions produce high-quality images, but design-conscious

call up a floor plan of the whole house and see which lights are on, or you can turn on lights in any room you want," says Pete Baker of Eden Prairie-based Custom Home Integration.

Your home lighting system can be programmed to function as part of the security system, giving the illusion that you're home even when you're not—by programming, for example, a vacation-mode sequence that turns on and off the lights, simulating a person's route to the living room to the hall to the owners' suite while you're away.

Installation is a team effort of all the professionals working on your home. "There's a lot that goes into putting in those systems, even the video and audio systems that are controlled by one remote or keypad," says Ray Miller of Eagan-based builder Millerville Inc. "Builders work with home-theater specialists, wire homes with bundles that contain all of the types of wiring they'll need, and work closely with HVAC contractors to get exactly what's needed."

homeowners looking for a thinner, more modern aesthetic are overwhelmingly choosing flat-panel displays, either plasma or LCD. For an even less conspicuous look, Vutec has devised ArtScreens that allow your plasma to double as a fine-art reproduction when it's not in use.

Plasmas, LCDs, and DLP televisions continue to get better, and in some cases, larger. Sony just announced that it's producing the largest plasma on the market, a 108-inch model that sells for about \$45,000, according to David Ault of Audio Video Planners in Oakdale. "A lot of the current technology has been around for a while, it's just that it's getting better and more reliable, and, in some cases, less expensive," he says.

For those who want to be on the cutting edge, however, Toshiba is launching an SED TV—based on a new technology—later this year. The picture on SEDs promise to be sharper than other large-screen TVs and without the slight delays often seen with plasmas and LCDs. Another must-have is LG's combination DVD and DVR, available this fall. Its 160-gigabyte hard drive from Microsoft allows users to record up to 160 hours of TV programming and play back music, photos, and video from Windows XP-based PCs.



An approach to home audio/video: great room with inconspicuous in-wall speakers.

Another key to a good home theater or media room is good sound. Typically, a home theater will have five to seven speakers and one subwoofer. Baker recommends, among others, Sonance's Ellipse speakers, which can be mounted in the ceiling and yet, because of their elliptical design and pivoting mid-tweeter, also be aimed directly at viewers.

The best home theaters also have theater-style tiered seating wired for sound. A "shaker" installed on the bottom of the seat will create a vibration for an even more interactive experience. Those looking for the ultimate interactive experience should check out the D-BOX Quest motion-simulation chairs that move and vibrate along with the action in the movie.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF RTI (LEFT) AND CUSTOM HOME INTEGRATION